



From THE DESK of

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SUWANEY YOUTH LEADERS

IT IS A MISTY, CLOUDY SATURDAY MORNING IN SUWANEY, GEORGIA. FORTY GROGGY-EYED YOUTH SIT IN SUWANEY CITY HALL. BUT THIS LANGUID PEACE DOES NOT LAST.

The cry of bagpipes pierces through the drowsy morning, growing louder and closer with each passing moment. Slowly, the teens wake up, one by one, attentive to the figure that appears before them. Gwinnett County Judge Shawn Bratton stands, in a kilt, puffing at a set of bagpipes. They watch in awe as he strides to the front of the room, filling it with the sound of Irish music. They feel it reverberate off the walls and through their bones, and finally, as he takes a bow, they begin to cheer.



As a fifteen-year-old high school junior year, I applied to the Suwanee Youth Leaders program in December of 2021, hoping to take part in a program recognized for the leadership experience and community relationships it imparts to its cohort. But as a newly accepted member, I did not expect that I would be sitting in City Hall on a Saturday morning listening to a judge play the bagpipes, or that I would thoroughly enjoy it.

Later that Saturday, Judge Bratton, joined by colleagues, gave the SYL Class of 2022 an introduction to mock trials. Overcome by a conviction to push myself out of my comfort zone and participate – despite my reservations about my abilities – I raised my hand and was chosen to serve as an attorney on the prosecution team.

Immediately, my body filled with adrenaline from fear and excitement from my spontaneous decision to be visible in front of the class. What had I signed up for? I felt insecure while discussing the trial with my fellow prosecuting attorney and our mentor, who were throwing around mock trial lingo as I sat there, numbly nodding in agreement. During our preparation for the trial, the team charged me with delivering the prosecutor’s opening statement, which produced more anxiety. Minutes later, with a dry throat and hefty burden of the microphone in my hand, I stood to deliver the prosecution’s opening statement.

Feeling the weight of my peers’ eyes on me, I decided at that moment to shed my intrusive thoughts and simply deliver.

At the time, I made that decision for my pride, to save myself from the embarrassment of stumbling in front of my peers. The sudden strength and courage I experienced as I began my statement surprised me.

Now, I recognize that I made an important decision to let myself be open, vulnerable, and free. I made a decision to trust myself, my peers, and my mentors.

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I sat back down after delivering the statement, I knowing I had not done exceptionally well. I doubt I even met the criteria for a mock trial competition. Nevertheless, I felt transformed as an individual and as a leader. I was proud of myself for looking into the eyes of my audience and letting the words flow, for allowing my peers to see me in front of them, mistakes and all.

I soaked in this new sensation, the feeling of knowing that I was being watched by my peers but not feeling the weight of expectations (theirs or mine) hinder me from performing in that moment. Even as a musician with experience performing for sizable audiences, the April SYL meeting was the first time I felt satisfied with my performance as I sat down afterward. I achieved something magnificent: Suwanee Youth Leaders had given me the courage to be visible in a crowd and have comfort in that visibility.

SYL will always remind me of the growth I can achieve if I accept my flaws as a leader and choose to lead despite them. I cherish my experiences - like listening to bagpipes at nine in the morning - and will always hold a special place in my heart for the people I have met. Suwanee Youth Leaders opened my eyes to the growth I can experience if I choose to push through my reservations, trust in my peers, and most of all, believe that I am capable of continually improving as a leader.

Aditi Venkatesh has been a part of the Suwanee community their entire life and is currently a senior at North Gwinnett High School. Apart from engaging with the Suwanee Youth Leadership team, they are involved in the Active Minds and NG DECA student organizations. Aditi hopes to employ the leadership and networking skills they have gained through their experience at SYL to pursue a career as a physics and mathematics research professor.

